

BY ROE OSBORN

Construction Career Day

Last spring, I reported on a job fair that I attended at a local tech school. At the event, I was impressed by the effort the school made to expose students to real-life contractors in search of employees. The job fair was put on by the school and was open to vendors from every area of concentration that the school offered—including, but not limited to, the building industry.

Then last fall, I was fortunate to attend a Career Day event that was put on at the Barnstable County Fairgrounds by a partnership between the Home Builders and Remodelers Association of Cape Cod (HBRACC) and the Cape and Islands Workforce Investment Board (CIWIB). The all-day event was attended by more than 350 high school students at all grade levels from schools on Cape Cod and in nearby southeastern Massachusetts. But unlike the job fair that I had attended in March, Career Day was specific to the building industry.

LEARNING WHILE JOB HUNTING

As at the job fair, there were dozens of vendors looking for “fresh blood,” new recruits to fill the employ-

ment voids that almost everyone in every phase of the industry is experiencing. Chris Duren, executive director of HBRACC, said that the workforce shortage is epidemic on Cape Cod, just as it seems to be all over the country. Working with the CIWIB was a unique opportunity to unite students who will be looking to join the workforce in the next four to six years with businesses who are eager to hire new employees.

But there was more to Career Day than vendors looking to sign on new employees. Outside, several stations were set up where students could experience hands-on snippets of building, from framing and installing windows to placing concrete and hardscape landscaping. These activities engaged the kids, who seemed genuinely interested in seeing firsthand things that they'd been learning in the classroom.

FROM JOB FAIR TO JOBSITE

While the hands-on demonstrations were going on outside, representatives from dozens of companies spoke to the students in a nearby metal barn about what their

More than 350 students attend Career Day, put on as a partnership between the Cape Cod Builders Association and the local Workforce Investment Board. Here, the students visit dozens of stations of companies looking for employees in every facet of the building industry.

Photos by Roe Osborn



Training the Trades

specific businesses had to offer. The real eye opener for me was learning about the challenges those companies were facing in finding new employees.

I asked Lindsay Cole—a human resources manager at Cape Associates, a large building company on the Cape—where she looks for new hires. Her answer: “Everywhere!” The company is constantly looking for new employees, she said, and the tech schools offer some of the best prospects. Cape Associates works with programs where students alternate between two weeks in the classroom and two weeks on the jobsite. This is trial by fire for the students, and it gets them out applying their education in immediate and real-life situations. Having students in these programs not only gets them interested in the work, Cole said, but it also gives the company name recognition; when the students are ready to join the workforce, they are much more likely to apply to a company that they have experience with.

I asked Cole if Cape Associates was gearing up to hire students for a busy summer, and she pointed out that spring was actually the busiest time for work on the Cape, as first and second homeowners try to get their places ready to use for the summer. Cole also said that the company is developing a skills test to place incoming employees in the right section of the company and at the right level.

In direct contrast to that strategy was another I learned about from Matt Anderson, owner of a framing company. When I asked him how he recruits and qualifies the people who come to him looking for work, he said with a chuckle, “I hold a mirror under their nose and have them exhale. If it fogs up, then they’re hired.” In other words, the only prerequisite is being alive. He went on to say, “Seriously, framing is hard work and if someone is interested in giving it a try, experience is good, but not required. We figure out pretty quickly if a person is going to pick up the techniques and work well with the team. Most framers learn from being out there every day.” He also said that he gets almost no calls from kids coming out of trade schools. By and large, his incoming employees are typically in their early 20s.

EXPOSURE TO OTHER AREAS OF THE INDUSTRY

Building companies and contractors weren’t the only ones represented at Career Day. I also spoke with building officials, architects, and landscape designers, as well as folks from the local utilities, about the challenges they have in recruiting employees.

At the booth for National Grid, a major natural-gas supplier in the region, I spoke to Joseph Carroll, director of community and customer management. The supplier’s biggest problem, he said, is an aging workforce, with an estimated 40% of the employees nearing retirement age. He added that he likes to show young adults that there are opportunities to stay on the Cape to live and work. For National Grid, some plumbing experience is a help, but the company has a nearby training facility and is willing to train employees to work in the field. Carroll also said that a big problem with teaching—both at schools and at facilities like National Grid—is that technology is moving more quickly than the education. Who is teaching the teachers?

In a positive follow-up to last spring’s tech-school job fair, I



Outside, students take part in hands-on demonstrations of jobsite tasks such as installing a window (above) and installing pavers for a walkway (left).

spoke to Ann Sweck, a human-resources representative from W. Vernon Whitely, a Cape-based plumbing company with more than 70 employees. She said that the company had hired two students from the spring event. But she also said that its search for new employees has been constant, even through the recession. And once an employee is hired, Sweck said, the company uses a system she called “shadowing,” in which a seasoned employee works with the new hire and monitors how the new employee progresses in various jobsite situations.

Finally, I had an interesting chat with Victor Staley, a building official from the town of Brewster, at a table representing code officials. He said that most kids don’t aspire to be building officials, and most building officials come from working in the industry in some capacity. The building-official table had a constant audience of young faces, and Staley explained that it’s important for them to see how the industry is regulated and for them to realize that a building official’s main job is ensuring that a building is safe for its occupants. He said, “You never know, maybe someday one of those students will be out there working as a building official.”

Roe Osborn is a senior editor at JLC.